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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BASRAH 000008

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR CROCKER VISITS BASRAH

REF: A. BASRAH 003 B. 07 BASRAH 102 C. 07 BASRAH 120

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REASON: 1.4 (a), (b), (c), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Ambassador Ryan Crocker visited Basrah on January 27 and met with the MND-SE commander, the UK PRT team leader, the provincial governor, Iraqi security commanders, and several tribal leaders. Common themes from the meetings included the threat and depth of Iranian influence, continuing deficiencies in the Iraqi Army (IA) and Iraqi Police (IP), and the need for foreign investment and economic development. While most agreed that Basrah's security had improved over the last six months, the meetings revealed differences between British and Iraqi perceptions on the scale of that progress and what challenges lie ahead. End summary and comment.

MND-SE Commander

¶2. (C) Major General Graham Binns, commander of Multinational Division-South East (MND-SE), noted that handing over Basrah's security to the Iraqis in December 2007 was a risk, but "so far, so good." Binns said that Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) performed well during the January 18 attacks by Jund al-Sama'a (Ref A) in comparison to their confrontation with Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) last October (Ref B). As a result, the ISF received a confidence boost, were impressed by the support they got from local Basrawis, and increased their understanding of what support MND-SE could offer them in a crisis. Binns also opined that the 14 IA Division performed better without Basrah Operations Commander, LTG Mohan Hafith Fahad, who was in London at the time.

¶3. (C) Previewing the future, Binns said that the UK planned to encourage the ISF to place more liaison officers in MND-SE to improve coordination. British forces also would shift ISF training from "learning by showing to learning by doing." In his view, the UK erred in the past by not embedding their forces with the ISF for fear of UK casualties.

¶4. (C) Regarding the UK's future force posture in Iraq, Binns predicted that MND-SE would be accepting some risk with Australia's early June downsizing in Dhi Qar province. He outlined two options: a UK reinforcement of a smaller Australian contingent or the U.S. brigade in Talil assumes responsibility for the battle space. In the latter case, Binns offered that it would make sense to move MND-C's borders to cover Dhi Qar. Binns opined that the chances of the UK staying in Basrah were good, despite London's current "intergovernmental soul

searching" in developing a policy beyond 2008. Low casualty rates had lowered the political costs of remaining and departing now could endanger the transatlantic relationship. He expected London to decide on a policy in early February.

UK PRT Team Leader

¶15. (C) Rob Tinline, UK Deputy Consul-General and PRT leader, said that the UK had considered last September pulling out of the PRT by April, but changed its mind due to security improvements. That said, continued rocket attacks against Basrah Air Station still dissuade international investors. Tinline predicted that Basrah would turn the corner when Basrawis realize militia rockets hinder economic opportunities and tell the militias to stop -- a view shared by Binns. Access to credit was also a problem; more needed to be done to "cut through the GOI's red tape." Hopefully, he said, the Basrah Development Commission (BDC) would be established by mid-February and would improve Basrah's exposure to international investors.

¶16. (C) Tinline said thus far the PRT had helped improve Basrah's governance by enabling the provincial council to set, execute, and spend its budget. While the PRT would focus on improving governance at the municipal levels in 2008, we should also expect to see economic development as a priority, especially with the additional presence of the BDC, UNDP and USAID.

Provincial Governor Wa'eli

¶17. (C) Basrah's provincial governor, Mohammed Musbeh Wa'eli (Fadhila Party), also emphasized prioritizing security over economic development. The most important step was purging the

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Iraqi Police. Iranian interference was to blame for the security problems, which he claimed worsened since the opening of the Iranian consulate. Wa'eli also claimed that the Department of Border Enforcement was ninety percent infiltrated by Badr Corps members who sympathized with Iran and allowed high-level IRGC Qods Force leaders into Iraq. Iran was also slant drilling into Iraqi oil fields from the Iranian side of the border, he said.

¶18. (C) Wa'eli said he favored early elections in Basrah, but warned that ISCI/Badr would attempt to manipulate the outcome by placing its followers in Basrah's 450 election centers. International observers would be crucial to fair elections this time. The Ambassador agreed that election integrity was important to avoid the problems of 2005 and underscored the need for enacting a new elections law and the Provincial Powers Law.

¶19. (C) On the investment front, Wa'eli said that the oil and gas sector functioned, but needed additional investment to keep Iraq from importing from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. There were also opportunities to develop the port of Um Qasr, but the ISF would have to break it from JAM, the Abu Feleth family, and ultimately Deputy Interior Minister Ahmad al-Khafaji's control. He also said that he had big plans for turning the al-Faw peninsula into a modern port facility and city. He claimed that investors were ready but waiting for improved security. Wa'eli also planned to cooperate with Gulf investors to turn Basrah Palace into a tourist destination. He noted that he was traveling to Baghdad to meet with Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh and obtain approval to use land by the airport for the construction of a hotel.

MOHAN

¶10. (C) Mohan told the Ambassador that the ISF in Basrah are doing "as much as possible" and generally maintain control, but remain woefully deficient. He said the 14 IA division existed

in name only -- the first two brigades were infiltrated by JAM, the third is still in training, and even when the division is fully operational it would not be enough to guarantee Basrah's security. He accused MND-SE of exaggerating reports on the capabilities and training of the division. Mohan said the IA needed heavier weapons and at least one brigade of armor to intimidate the militias. Until then, he explained, he was "flexing muscles he did not have."

¶11. (C) Mohan blamed the lack of support on Baghdad. He claimed that PM Nuri al-Maliki's advisors and Iranian-backed clerics were "brainwashing" Maliki into believing that a strong army would be a threat to the PM's office. A lack of unity in the Defense Ministry, exemplified by infighting between Defense Minister Abd al-Qadir al-Mufriji and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Babaqir Zebari, further inhibited the army's development. Mohan also said the Ministry of Interior was weak and accused al-Khafaji of being an Iranian agent determined to prevent police reform.

¶12. (C) Mohan identified the number one threat to Basrah as Iranian intelligence activities, and emphasized the inability of Iraqi intelligence to counter the threat. Smuggling across the open borders would also continue unless three divisions were posted along it. Militias were growing, especially JAM and Hizbollah, as new residents arrived. JAM, the strongest of all, was divided into followers of Muqtada al-Sadr (Mohan characterized them as "ok"), Iranian-backed Special Groups, and gangsters. He estimated the total number of JAM members in Basrah at 20,000 (not all of which are fighters) and noted how quickly the three different groups could unite when they wanted.

JALIL

¶13. (C) Ambassador Crocker congratulated Jalil for his handling of the Jund al-Sama'a uprising on January 18, which Jalil recapped (ref A). Jalil noted that his efforts to purge the IP of militia influence contributed to the success, but further purges were necessary. Jalil dismissed Jund al-Sama'a as a serious threat, maintaining that JAM was the "main player" in Basrah, belligerent and well-armed. He also criticized Mohan's agreement allowing JAM to keep their weapons in their homes and maintain the right to "fight the occupation." At some point, Jalil said, JAM would have to be disarmed and confronted.

¶14. (C) Jalil, like the other interlocutors, cited Iranian influence and the long, porous border as another problem. He claimed that all of the parties were infiltrated by Iranian

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agents (especially ISCI/Badr) and that Iran was paying people off to do its bidding.

¶15. (C) In Jalil's estimation, the ISF was undermanned and poorly armed. The IP needed more armored HMMWVs, 250 pickup trucks and heavier weapons. (Comment: We have requested 30 armored HMMWVs from MNSTC-I for Jalil.) Two divisions, not one, would be necessary to effectively control the province. He also said it made sense for the Facilities and Oil Protection Services to fall under the Ministry of the Interior for command and logistical reasons. Jalil concluded that he felt alone in trying to tackle Basrah's problems because the GOI provided "zero support."

TRIBAL SHEIKHS

¶16. (C) Basrah's leading tribal sheikhs, Sabah al-Maliki, Abdul Karim al-Dosari, and Ghadban Abu Reisha, painted a gloomier picture for the Ambassador. They echoed other comments that the ISF are weak and infiltrated by the militias, JAM continues to operate at will, and the borders are unsecured. Iranian influence is pervasive -- IRGC agents cross the border freely under the cover of militias or political parties and had

intelligence offices in Karbala, Najaf, Kut, Nasiriyah and Basrah (Sabah claimed Iranian intelligence numbered 1,800 in Basrah alone). All three sheikhs accused Maliki of surrounding himself with Iranian sympathizers, and Ghabban said that Badr/ISCI, Sayid al Shuhada, Hizbollah and some Da'wa members pursued Iranian objectives in the province.

¶17. (C) They added that the unemployment rate was around 70 percent and compelled young men to join the militias; medical services were in shambles and costly, with doctors afraid to practice because militias assassinated the educated; some villages only had electrical power for 1.5 hours per day; and the educational system was getting worse with three generations of students attending the same school. Municipal leaders blamed CF for service delivery failures. While they asked for a role in improving Basrah, they also claimed that the GOI set red lines prohibiting tribal interference. They asked for U.S. support in getting GOI approval for the nomination of tribal recruits to the IP (Ref C).

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